

*'The First Circle'*

By Gary Arnold

The movie version of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's novel, "The First Circle," now at the Outer Circle 2, is a stirring and gratifying experience after such new American movies as "Save the Tiger" and "The Thief Who Came to Dinner." While "Tiger" was quite serious in intent and "Thief" quite frivolous, I came away from both feeling equally apprehensive. If they're touchstones, we may spend the '70s consorting with nothing but morally and socially bankrupt "hero" figures, treated sentimentally in the serious scripts and facetiously in the frivolous ones. Either way the prospect is grim.

"The First Circle" helps to restore a sense of proportion by reminding us of the beauty of traditional heroism and moral courage. Materially, the leading characters have grim futures ahead of them—further imprisonment and intimidation—but morally they keep the faith.

"The First Circle" was shot in Denmark, with Elsinore Castle serving as the principal location, by the noted Polish director Alexander Ford. A widely respected, pioneering figure in the history of Polish filmmaking, Ford began making documentaries and features in the late '20s and worked as a documentarian in the Soviet Union during World War II. He organized the Polish Army Film Unit, which became a nucleus of the post-war movie industry, and in 1955 he became artistic director of the "Studio" film unit, which spawned most of the major new talents and works of the Polish film resurgence in the late '50s and early '60s.

The story takes place in the winter of 1949-50 at a unique sort of scientific research institute in a suburb of Moscow. One of the unique aspects is that the scientists, mathematicians and engineers employed at the institute are employed by force. They are political prisoners, assembled from various hard labor camps to work on devices to improve the efficiency and

peace of mind of Stalin and the secret police—i.e., telephone bugging and antibugging equipment, voice graphs, etc. The terrible irony of the situation is that the men can only succeed as human beings if they fail as scientists. If they fail, they face a return to Siberia.

The project is bounded from the start by bureaucratic pressure: Stalin and his subordinates expect the inventions to be delivered by fixed dates, which inevitably prove to be unrealistic. Under the circumstances, it's both natural and desirable for the inmates to prolong their acoustical researches and tinkering for as long as possible. Considering the choices before them, one could scarcely blame any of the men for trying to give the authorities what they want, so their deliberate failure, procrastination and defiance seem even more heroic and inspiring. They repress their discoveries and breakthroughs, knowing that they would be used as instruments of social and political repression.

The principal figure, Solzhenitsyn's semi-autobiographical hero, is the splendidly defiant Gleb Nerzhin, a mathematician and former artillery officer. He is beautifully embodied on the screen by Gunther Malzacher, an actor with sharp, rawboned features rather like the American actor Fritz Weaver and with an agreeably ironic presence.

The novel's variety of characters and wealth of information don't make it onto the screen, and even some of the important characters who remain, like Rubin, who tries to maintain his communist convictions while being persecuted by the Soviet regime, get rather cursory treatment. Nerzhin is the only fully realized character in the film, but for movie purposes he's probably sufficient and as contemporary movie heroes

Alexander Ford's best-known films of the post-war period were "Five Boys from Barska Street," "The Young Chopin," "The Eighth Day of the Week" and "Knights of the Teutonic Order." He finally left Poland in 1968, evidently in reaction to increasing censorship and anti-Semitism. Ford began working on a movie adaptation of "The First Circle" while living in Israel (he had shot a feature called "Sabra" in Palestine in 1934).

The production, acquired for domestic release by Paramount, was shot with a European cast, predominantly Scandinavian, speaking uninflected English lines. Other actors read the dialogue for the sound track, and while the dubbing has its obtrusive and hollow spots, the voices are good and the technique tolerably effective. "The First Circle" may also prove less distracting for American audiences because the voices are American Theatrical, rather than British Theatrical, as in

"One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich."

Ford has made a virtue of many of his limited resources. It appears he had to work in fairly tight quarters, and the film has an unusual number of closeups, particularly for a wide-screen production. However, the lighting and composition are extremely attractive and professionally canny. Ford's closeups never resemble television closeups. The selection of actors is equally astute: the faces themselves are strong, and they attract and hold one's attention.

There are gaps in the continuity and abrupt transitions that lead one to suspect Paramount may have

done some trimming here and there. For the most part Ford's screenplay (prepared with the assistance of his wife, who was born in the United States) seems to be an intelligent condensation of the novel. Ford hasn't tried to duplicate the scope of the book, but he does succeed in transmitting its central conflict and moral fervor to the screen. He is true to the spirit of Solzhenitsyn's work.

Like the novel, the film tends to obscure the strictly moral nature of the dissidents' victory over their jailors. One can't ignore the fact that the inventions this non-cooperative group fails to provide were eventually provided by others willing and even avid to cooperate, but the artists seem to ignore it.

It's not unusual for mystics to overestimate the practical effects of their personal example, to attain a purity and strength of conviction few of us can share. The behavior of a Solzhenitsyn or Nerzhin is heroic and exemplary, but the Soviet political system makes it virtually impossible for that behavior to carry any political clout, to change things tangibly. Over here we maintain the status quo more informally: the dissidents can still complain publicly, but more often than not nobody listens.

MMPA Rating: R

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